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ABSTRACT

Staff from eight community colleges experimented with a team mentoring relationship to strengthen their programs for students with disabilities. This project explored ways in which disability support service (DSS) professionals could benefit from mentoring by their peers in other institutions. From a national applicant pool of 47 colleges, 4 were selected to participate in the project. In a separate competitive process, DSS professionals from four additional colleges became the project mentor team. Each mentor was paired with an individual college and its two-person team, consisting of a DSS practitioner and a college administrator. The mentors became "outside experts," neutral observers who could act as advisors. Information on implementation, contacts, challenges, and success factors is provided for each of the four participating colleges: Coconino Community College, Arizona; SUNY College of Technology at Delhi, New York; Harrisburg Area Community College, Pennsylvania; and Ocean County College, New Jersey. (AS)

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Mentoring for Disability Support Service Program Development

ED 422 042

AACC Project Brief
AACC-PB-97-2

Lynn Barnett

American Association of Community Colleges

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PROJECT BRIEF

AACC-PB-97-2

Disability Support Services

Mentoring for Disability Support Service Program Development

Lois Barnett, Project Director

Staff from eight community colleges experimented with a team mentoring relationship to strengthen their programs for students with disabilities. Sponsored by AACC with support from the U.S. Department of Education, the 1995–1996 project explored ways that disability support service (DSS) professionals could benefit from mentoring by their peers in other institutions. From a national applicant pool of 47 colleges, four were selected to participate in the project. In a separate competitive process, DSS professionals from four additional colleges became the project mentor team. Each mentor was paired with an individual college and its two-person team, consisting of a DSS practitioner and a college administrator. The mentors became "outside experts," neutral observers who could validate or advise.

The colleges received no direct cash grants: the project provided travel funds for structured group planning and evaluation exercises, as well as campus site visits by mentors. A team approach was emphasized throughout the project. Each institution provided significant commitment and some financial support, and project activities continued beyond the grant period.

Four colleges implemented plans to strengthen their disability support service programs:

- **Coconino Community College, AZ,** acknowledged the cultural context of its distant campus and created connections and training to provide equitable disability support services at a rural extension site serving students from the Navajo Nation.
- **Harrisburg Area Community College, PA,** took a holistic approach to its support services and emphasize an institution-wide service delivery system that included integrated assistive technology and improved transfer opportunities.
- **Ocean County College, NJ,** developed plans for students' transition to work by offering community-wide courses on disability issues, surveying student needs and job opportunities, and building a campus-wide team.
- **SUNY, College of Technology at Delhi, NY,** provided professional development activities for faculty and staff to improve teaching and advising and to create a positive campus climate for the college's increasing numbers of students with disabilities.

Four mentors from the following colleges served the project:

- Calhoun State Community College, AL
- New River Community College, VA
- Richland College, TX
- St. Philips College, TX

Mentoring Success Factors

Information Sharing

Mentor Expertise/Generosity

Focused Planning

Site Visits

Written Guidelines

Continuing Network

Team Approach

AACC Support

Note: Findings drawn from a post-project participant survey.

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Coconino Community College

Flagstaff, Arizona

Creating Community Connections to Support Disability Resources for Rural Extension Sites

Coconino Community College (CCC) was founded in 1991 with 970 students. By fall 1998, enrollment had jumped to more than 4,100. Of these, some 270 students attended the small rural Page campus 137 miles from the main campus. Page's population is approximately 60 percent Navajo and 40 percent white and other races. While students with disabilities on the Flagstaff campus were receiving adequate assistance, those on the Page campus were not. CCC's Disability Support Office team launched a community-based project that included workshops on disability awareness and assistive technology. They increased the use of assistive technology and provided more consistent transition planning for high school students. The team collaborated with the Navajo Nation Office of Special Education and Vocational Rehabilitation to improve services overall.

Implementation

The project began with a site visit from the project mentor, who worked with the college team to determine how the Page Campus could reach appropriate levels of service to its students with disabilities, including ways to meet federal requirements. The mentor addressed the administration and board about compliance issues and advised team leaders about effective ways to seek funding and community support for essential programs.

Twenty people attended the Disability Awareness Workshop. They reported gaining greater empathy about barriers faced by people with disabilities as one woman told about her daily challenges. The Assistive Technology Workshop emphasized determining a task's goal before selecting an accommodation, and participants tried low-tech devices. Community linkages, a mailing list, and training plans resulted from these workshops.

Initial telephone contacts with Navajo Nation Vocational Rehabilitation counselors were followed by more successful personal meetings. A strong working relationship resulted in weekly contact and collaboration on how to improve services at several campuses and to deal appropriately with unique needs such as culturally based learning styles.

To help develop consistent transition planning for high school students, CCC sponsored presentations at the high school that included information on vocational counseling, disability resources, and campus tours.

CCC is working with Northern Arizona University (NAU) on assessment services, technology funding, and resource sharing, especially in outlying areas. CCC students receive training through NAU's assistive technology project.

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Disability Awareness Training

Assistive Technology Training

Cooperation with Navajo Nation

Transition Planning

Increased Assistive Technology in Outlying Areas

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Challenges and Success Factors

Cultural differences threatened to sabotage linkages with Navajo representatives until face-to-face contact turned an obstacle into successful collaboration.

Transition planning was hindered when the primary contact person was injured.

The project mentor advised, encouraged community involvement, and gave invaluable information on funding and requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

CCC has built a new campus at Page with space and accessibility that was previously lacking. The school anticipates that more students with disabilities will join the five currently enrolled. Funding is underway to establish a half-time Disabilities Resources Coordinator at the Page campus.

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A Holistic Approach to Servicing Students with Disabilities

Harrisburg Area Community College
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

Harrisburg Area Community College (HACC) is an urban institution that also serves students from suburban and rural areas. With a service area that includes 22 school districts, it has additional campuses and centers with more than 10,100 students. Students with disabilities comprise about 2 percent of the total enrollment on this fully accessible campus. The Special Services Program has a full-time faculty coordinator. Since the inception of a formalized program for students with disabilities, enrollment by students with disabilities has increased by more than 400 percent, greatly increasing the need for cooperation and service coordination. The project helped to improve HACC's disabilities service delivery system, boosted staff expertise, integrated assistive technology, and improved transfer opportunities to four-year institutions. Work within the community to create community linkages and develop job transition and placement activities also proved successful.

Implementation

At a well-publicized, three-day campus visit, the project mentor conducted informational training sessions on accommodating students with disabilities, met with key individuals at the college, and recommended ways to enhance HACC's disability support services (DSS) program. The team and mentor met twice more to refine project activities, share resources and expertise, and evaluate progress.

To help improve the DSS delivery system, the college project team distributed brochures describing services, provided mid-term class progress reports for students with disabilities, and conducted follow-up surveys to DSS students. The team also evaluated software packages and developed resource manuals for faculty and students.

Improved services—including faculty support and integrated use of assistive technology—were attributed to the involvement of key people on the project team. Supportive administrators and skilled counselors were crucial to the project, as was the overall staff training program. Materials were distributed to help students become aware of transfer opportunities to four-year colleges.

To create community linkages, HACC developed a transition checklist for high school, implemented a growing referral network, and established a community advisory board. The board provides information on employment, training, cultural, and social activities to students with disabilities. An action plan was developed to assist students with disabilities in job transition and placement, and students with disabilities took part in the annual college job fair.

Challenges and Success Factors

The college has a strong commitment to ensure that students with disabilities are treated fairly, have equal access to all programs and services, and are treated with respect. This attitude spread widely across the campus as the project progressed.

The mentoring process—including an excellent match between mentor and team—helped define goals, objectives, and timelines, and provided opportunities for invaluable feedback on a number of issues.

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Delivery System

Job Transition and Placement

Assistive Technology

Transfer Opportunities

Community Linkages

Staff Support

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Ocean County College

Toms River, New Jersey

Project EDGE: Enhancing Disabled Graduates Employment

Since 1964, when Ocean County College (OCC) began its mission as an open-door college, its enrollment has grown to more than 8,000 students. The college established P.A.S.S. (Project Academic Skills Support) in 1987, created its Disability Resources Center (DRC) in 1993, and has become a regional center for college students with learning disabilities. Because the area's rapid population growth is not matched by economic and cultural development, limited employment opportunities affect everyone. Persons with disabilities—even individuals with degrees—often find it difficult to gain employment. The new Enhancing Disabled Graduates Employment (EDGE) project evolved from P.A.S.S. and has on transition-to-work issues. Activities include assessing existing campus career activities, reviewing current research to assess transition needs, and offering community-wide courses addressing disability issues.

Implementation

An initial visit with the project mentor helped establish the 23-member EDGE team, which met monthly and consisted of representatives from college staff and students, local agencies and employers, and the community. The team conducted surveys and reviewed results to generate suggestions for improving career services—and opted to continue for another year to follow up on implementation. EDGE team suggestions often paralleled campus Retention Committee recommendations and followed the "system change" philosophy of the national School-to-Work initiative.

The mentor played an important role in presenting comprehensive information to students and OCC staff. The mentor and team leaders met with the OCC president, and a meeting between the mentors, team members, and key campus personnel resulted in frank exchange and goals clarification.

A campus survey indicated that students receive career information through the classroom, but help offered through OCC's Career Center, library, and seminars was often overlooked. A community poll indicated multiple needs—information and support on disability-related issues, learning opportunities for practical workplace demands, and better skills for locating employment. Common barriers to employment encountered by people with disabilities included transportation problems, limited work experience, limited job-seeking skills, and lack of marketable skills.

The OCC graduates with disabilities who were surveyed reported general satisfaction with DRC staff availability. Half reported career preparation as the reason for their enrollment at OCC. Respondents also mentioned seeking employment and difficulties in entering the job market as pertinent issues. All respondents to a telephone survey said they needed guidance in finding employment.

OCC and two local agencies presented an on-campus informational seminar, and OCC cooperated with another local group to develop a series of employment-related seminars, including resume writing and interview process simulation at Career Empowerment Day. An existing class focused on job-seeking skills, understanding the effects of disability legislation, and the interview process.

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Transition to Work

Research Review

Transitions Needs Assessment

Community-wide Training

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Challenges and Successes

Seminars were well-received by attendees, despite sparse attendance resulting from inadequate promotion.

OCC president's support was key to EDGE's success, since project implementation involved a systems change for the entire campus. The mentor's site visit, critical feedback on grant-related activities, and objective perspective all helped to maintain project focus.

The EDGE project also benefited from important non-monetary resources—professional expertise and support from other community colleges.

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A Team Approach to Meeting the Needs of "Our" Students with Disabilities

Located in rural, upstate New York, the College of Technology at Delhi serves about 2,100 students in both traditional and technological/trade programs. The college currently enrolls nearly 300 students with disabilities—an enormous increase over the past two years. A high percentage of these are students with learning disabilities, many of whom are enrolled in the trade programs. Greater student numbers combined with fewer support staff and severe budget cuts forced Delhi to look for innovative ways to serve its students. By fostering campus-wide ownership of meeting the needs of students with disabilities, the college increased faculty and staff awareness of disability issues and helped faculty develop greater proficiency in teaching and advising students with special needs.

Implementation

The project began strongly with the mentor's first visit, funded through the college president's budget. A keynote address to faculty and staff explained the project and inspired enthusiasm for participation. A second visit featured inservice workshops conducted by the mentor for faculty, staff, and students. These well-attended sessions helped built relationships among participants and left them with a unified purpose. Additional workshops followed.

A Disabilities Advisory Team was formed, giving ownership of the project to the entire campus. The team developed a faculty/staff handbook and sponsored Disability Awareness Week activities to raise awareness of disabilities issues. Activities included administrators trying out a disability in "Disabled for a Day," a seated campus volleyball tournament, and a stress management workshop for students with disabilities.

A Faculty Liaison Group has emerged from the Disabilities Advisory Team to help provide inservice training to instructors. Since many of the faculty are local tradespeople or technicians with little formal training in teaching methods, this approach has offered great benefits.

Student involvement increased through "Common Ground" (a club for students with disabilities), classroom presentations, and student newspaper articles publicizing administrative support for project initiatives. Students with disabilities also nominated faculty and staff who show particular caring and service to receive awards sponsored by the Disabilities Advisory Team.

Faculty and staff were surveyed concerning their beliefs, knowledge, and attitudes about students with disabilities both before and after the project. Project success was gauged by the evidence of significant changes in prior-held beliefs as well as the level of respondent participation in disability-related activities. A significant change in attitude appeared to have taken place. The survey also provided information on where to focus ongoing efforts.

Challenges and Successes

Despite severe budget cuts, the college president placed a high priority on providing disability support services by funding an additional mentor visit. This firm support of the project helped set the stage for campus-wide cooperation.

The mentor, knowledgeable about rural communities, brought insights that encouraged collaboration and helped avoid pitfalls. The mentoring process was viewed as invaluable to the college and helped provide a continuing support system.

The liaison team approach ensured active participation and ownership of the program. The Disabilities Advisory Team began organizing a whole new agenda, and the activities implemented during the project are poised to continue.

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Campus-wide Ownership

Increased Awareness

Faculty Development

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Selected Resources

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